

2008

Deconstruction and the Medieval Indefinite Article: The Undecidable Medievalism of Brian Helgeland's A Knight's Tale

Louise D'Arcens

University of Wollongong, louised@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

D'Arcens, Louise, Deconstruction and the Medieval Indefinite Article: The Undecidable Medievalism of Brian Helgeland's A Knight's Tale 2008.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/1757>



Deconstruction and the Medieval Indefinite Article:
The Undecidable Medievalism
of Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*

Louise D'Arcens

Studies in medievalism have made inroads into questioning the forensic impulse to restore, know, and possess the medieval past. And yet many of these studies continue to exhibit anxiety about anachronism within medievalist texts, and persist in privileging the medieval 'original' as the 'transcendental signified' that determines what is permissible in medievalist adaptations. By examining Brian Helgeland's provocatively anachronistic film *A Knight's Tale*, we gain insight into the residual Platonism within studies of medievalist film, which continue to evaluate these films' fidelity to a medieval *zeitgeist*. A deconstructive approach to Helgeland's film, however, allows us to challenge the devaluation of the medievalist text and to treat both medieval and medievalist texts as co-originary collaborators in the process of meaning-making.

At first glance, the title of Brian Helgeland's film *A Knight's Tale* (2001) seems rich with Chaucerian promise: has somebody, we ask ourselves, really turned the first Canterbury Tale into a film? Looking closer, however, one notices the subtle yet crucial grammatical shift that breaks the promise: this is not *The Knight's Tale*, definite article, but *A Knight's Tale*, indefinite article; it could refer to Chaucer's knight, but then it could refer to any knight, historical or literary, narrator or narrated.¹ I wish to analyse *A Knight's Tale* and the scholarly responses and debates it has generated, as an entry point into a deconstructive analysis of medievalism studies, adapting the logic and selected terminology from the work of Jacques Derrida to tease out what I see as a constitutive hermeneutic paradox that lingers at the core of how medievalism studies, and studies of medievalist film in particular, understands and represents the medieval past. This paradox is best described as a residual unacknowledged Platonism – a faith, despite protestations to the contrary, in the Middle Ages as 'definite article', that is as stable origin that can be rendered present as well as ultimate guarantor of meaning in medievalist appropriations.

¹ *A Knight's Tale*, dir. Brian Helgeland, Black and Blu Entertainment (Columbia Pictures, 2001).

A Knight's Tale proves to be a particularly illuminating text for exploring this residual Platonism, as it both provokes and dramatizes anxieties about the relationship between the medieval and medievalism, literature and film, and more generally, the original and the copy. Accepting the challenge this film cheekily but defiantly throws out – that we *not* treat it as a degraded iteration of Chaucer's tale or more generally of medieval romance – leads to a displacement of the implicit privileging of the medieval over the medievalist text. This in turn enables scholars of medievalism to embrace an unapologetic practice of treating both medieval and medievalist texts as 'indefinite articles', that is as partial and co-originary contributors to the long and miscellaneous process of medievalist meaning-making. This approach not only enables but invites, even demands, an evaluation of the aesthetic and ideological merits of medievalist texts.

It might seem odd to be returning to Derrida after he has been consigned to the nether-regions of the lit-crit closet, along with other 'eighties relics such as shoulder-pads. In *Congenial Souls*, her sophisticated long history of Chaucerian reading communities, Stephanie Trigg situates the zenith of deconstructive playfulness within the broader 'theoretical', interdisciplinary turn of the early 1980s, which she describes as a 'heady period of ... confident expansion ... and risk taking' whose practices were retracted throughout the more sober 1990s.² The fact that over the past decade medievalism studies has been experiencing a period of robust growth suggests that it is arguably ripe for this more experimental kind of self-examination. And indeed there has been a creeping return of it into the critical idiom of medieval and medievalism studies. Trigg's study itself wears its Derridean colours lightly but unmistakably, using Derrida's conceptualization of the signature as a leitmotif for its discussion of the dissemination of 'the Chaucer effect'. In taking up a deconstructive approach to medievalism studies, I wish, borrowing Fred Orton's paraphrase, to analyse 'texts which themselves take up a severely critical attitude to their own tradition and to show that these texts ... *repeat the errors they criticize in a disguised way*'.³

In analyzing the residual desire for medieval presence among scholars of medievalism, I am particularly (though not exclusively) concerned with the ways it has emerged in the work of those scholars whose interest in medievalism

2 Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 200.

3 Fred Orton, 'On Being Bent 'Blue' (Second State): An Introduction to Jacques Derrida/A Footnote on Jasper Johns', *Oxford Art Journal*, 12.1 (1989), 35–46 (p. 36), italics in original.

emerged as a corollary to their reflexive engagement with medieval studies. For at least two decades within what can be called critical medieval studies, there has been a general and thoroughgoing critique of the positivistic ideal of gaining access to an unmediated Middle Ages. This critique is both too well-known and too multi-faceted to be rehearsed in detail here. Of most significance for my purposes is the argument that draws out the central paradox of positivistic method: that is, the methods deployed by positivistic scholars service their insistence on the alterity of the Middle Ages yet simultaneously reflect a disavowed desire to rescue the text from that alterity – a forensic impulse to restore it to life, render it knowable, and thereby possess it. Some of the best and most provocative work within medieval studies, such as that of Louise O. Fradenburg, has uncovered the desires and traumas underlying medieval scholars' relationship to the Middle Ages by productively engaging psychoanalytic discourse.⁴ Others such as Trigg have worked within an analytical framework that is closer to my own, exploring the desire for proximity with the medieval author that underpins much medieval literary scholarship – in Trigg's words, the 'unspoken and increasingly unspeakable desire to see and speak with Chaucer, to capture an elusive, virtually forbidden moment of authorial presence'.⁵ As this statement eloquently suggests, a desire to resuscitate the immediate presence of the Middle Ages, far from being limited to the efforts of dilettantish re-enactors, continues to haunt professional medieval studies in this desire make the text speak for itself in its 'own' voice – or, as Derrida describes it in "Plato's Pharmacy", to 'substitut[e] the breathless sign with the living voice'.⁶

So where is medievalism studies in all this? On the one hand it is too reflexive to reproduce medieval studies' faith in presence and the ideal of unmediated access to the medieval past, yet on the other hand, this same reflexivity bars it from adopting an untroubled affirmation of historical anachronism. This impasse is perhaps best summarized by the contradictions attending Anglo-Saxonist John Niles's iconoclastic statement that 'despite all one's passion for accuracy in sifting through the annals of the past, it no longer matters what "really happened" in history ... what does matter ... is *what people believe*

4 Louise O. Fradenburg, "'So That We May Speak of Them': Enjoying the Middle Ages', *New Literary History*, 28.2 (1997), 205–30.

5 Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, p. xv.

6 Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 63–94 (p. 92).

happened in history'.⁷ In a footnote to this same argument, Niles qualifies its relativistic provocation by drawing a distinction between 'historical claims ... based on good evidence', 'innocent distortions of the truth', and 'impudent lies'; a distinction that clearly aligns the ethical use of the past with a desire for accuracy.⁸ This qualified iconoclasm is not unique to Niles; rather, it can be found in the work of a number of scholars of medievalism. Clare A. Simmons, for instance, in her *Medievalism and the Quest for the "Real" Middle Ages*, points to a similar conflict at the heart of Norman Cantor's incendiary book *Inventing the Middle Ages*. For while Cantor sets out to demonstrate the subjective basis of medieval scholarship, he also criticizes earlier scholars' 'narrow data base' and 'misunderstanding' of the Middle Ages, thereby, in Simmons' view, 'pursu[ing] the ghost of a "real" Middle Ages at the same time as he lays that ghost to rest'.⁹

I do not mention these scholars to ridicule them for being naïvely self-contradictory. On the contrary, I believe the tension at play in the scholarship I have mentioned is indicative of the complexity of the project of medievalism studies itself. Indeed, if we were to judge recent work only on those occasional 'sound-bites' such as Niles' declaration of freedom from positivism, whilst ignoring the telling contradictions that come on the heels of these breezy declarations, we might have the impression that medievalism studies is a much more facile and relativistic endeavour than it actually is. It is, rather, because it makes such a serious and sensitive attempt to steer a course between the poles of relativism and closure that this discipline has not been able to rid itself of the spectre of the originary Middle Ages that haunts it.

A rhetorical symptom of this is the widespread tendency amongst medievalism scholars to evoke medieval textual traditions either to 'elevate' the medievalist text or to justify the use of theoretical/medievalist approaches. Martha Driver, for instance, draws an analogy between the 'multivalenced' cinematic retellings of medieval legends and the *mouvance* of the medieval text as theorized by Paul Zumthor, arguing '[l]ike the ... King Arthur stories on film, medieval texts are multivalenced and often open-ended, the same stories told and re-told across time,

7 John D. Niles, 'Appropriations: A Concept of Culture', in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, eds Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), pp. 202–28 (p. 216), italics in original.

8 Niles, 'Appropriations', p. 216.

9 Clare A. Simmons, 'Introduction', in *Medievalism and the Quest for the 'Real' Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Simmons (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 1–28 (p. 17).

in many cultures and in many languages'.¹⁰ Driver is deploying an identifiable strategy found throughout medievalism studies: it is now commonplace to encounter a characteristic hermeneutic circularity in medievalism scholarship whereby the querying of the concept of the 'real Middle Ages' is executed by way of tropes from the Middle Ages. To take just two more examples, Simmons declares that today '[t]he 'authenticity' that once divided medieval studies and Medievalisms no longer seems a scholarly possibility', yet she buttresses her argument for medievalism, and authorizes its practices, by using a historically grounded argument about the medievalist impulse that can be found even in the work of medieval writers such as Malory and Caxton who, she says, 'distance[d] themselves from part of the Middle Ages'.¹¹ Similarly Nicholas Watson, in his powerful essay 'Desire for the Past', authorizes the appropriative use of the Middle Ages by way of a sophisticated construal of the verb 'to appropriate' as it was understood in the medieval period.¹²

In many cases these analogies between pre- and postmodern textual practices are not only elegant but valid and mutually illuminating. Simmons goes so far as to suggest that the drawing of such analogies is in fact distinctive and central to medievalism as a practice, arguing that 'the use of ... form without reference to a value-system believed to derive from the Middle Ages is not Medievalism'.¹³ Furthermore, there is a genuine pleasure in identifying this uncanny 'pre/post' resemblance – what Bruce W. Holsinger has aptly called the 'eccentric affiliations' between pre- and postmodern notions of textuality¹⁴ – and possibly also a justified (though rather more smug?) pleasure in reclaiming concepts around textual instability and intertextuality from the ahistorical clutches of the postmodernists. It is not my purpose here to discredit these analogies. Rather, what I am intrigued by is the fact that they deploy a rhetorical manoeuvre of justifying medievalism

10 Martha W. Driver, 'What's Accuracy Got to Do with It? History and Authenticity in Medieval Film', in *The Medieval Hero On Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, eds Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2004), pp. 19–22 (p. 20).

11 Simmons, 'Introduction', p. 2.

12 Nicholas Watson, 'Desire for the Past', in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, eds Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 149–98.

13 Simmons, 'Introduction', p. 22.

14 Bruce W. Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. ix. Holsinger's book, of course, goes far beyond simply identifying affiliations, demonstrating, rather, that French poststructuralists actively 'recruited' the Middle Ages to develop a number of their key theories.

via the medieval, a manoeuvre I want to suggest exposes a residual anxiety about anachronistically 'betraying' the Middle Ages and attempts to ward off this anxiety by 're-medievalising' medievalism, thereby demonstrating medievalism scholars' historical fidelity and hermeneutic proximity to the premodern period.

Another good way into exploring the paradoxical Platonism I mentioned earlier is examining the anxieties around anachronism that can be found in analyses of contemporary popular medievalism. A paradigmatic case of this is the scholarly work on Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*. Before discussing this scholarship, I will offer a brief synopsis of film's narrative. The film's English hero, William Thatcher, a low-born squire to a knight named Sir Ector, has just discovered that his master has suddenly died. Motivated by desperation and ambition, William decides to try for a cash prize at a tournament by passing himself off as his dead master (he is unrecognizable in Sir Ector's armour). Buoyed by his victory, he decides to continue on this course, inventing for himself the title Sir Ulrich of Lichtenstein. On his way to a tournament in Rouen, William encounters a naked and destitute young man who introduces himself as Geoffrey Chaucer. Guessing that William is not a nobleman, 'Geoff', who has indicated that he is actually a writer, offers his services forging patents of nobility to confirm the pedigree of 'Sir Ulrich' in exchange for clothes and shoes to replace those he has lost through gambling.

While at Rouen, William/Ulrich becomes enamoured of the beautiful Jocelyn, and establishes a rivalry in love and jousting with the arrogant Count Adhemar. Jocelyn demands that William/Ulrich allow himself to be defeated as a love-proof to her; William/Ulrich complies until she finally allows him to strive for victory. He goes on to win several tournaments, assisted by the new Nike-swooshed armour created for him by the talented female blacksmith, Kate. Meanwhile, Geoff has evolved into a sort of manager-publicist for William/Ulrich at the tournaments, whipping up crowd enthusiasm for the ersatz knight with increasingly embellished accounts of his pedigree and prowess.

The film's final episodes revolve around a tournament in London. Back in his hometown, William risks being found out when he slips away from the lists to visit his blind, impoverished father, who is overjoyed to be reunited with him. Adhemar, who has followed William, exposes his imposture as 'Sir Ulrich' and has him put in stocks. William goes on not only to be released but also knighted by Edward the Black Prince, who has recognized William's innate nobility despite his humble birth. The newly ennobled William goes into his first battle as a genuine knight, where he unhorses Adhemar and wins the fair Jocelyn. Roll credits.

In the scholarly work on the film we find, on the one hand, a clear disavowal of 'the real Middle Ages', and an embracing of the differential hermeneutic proliferation of medievalist textuality; and yet, on the other hand, an implicit reliance upon the very 'real' Middle Ages it disavows. This is particularly the case with scholarship that engages with the film's instrumentalization of the Middle Ages to service the hegemonic ideologies of contemporary American popular culture. Arguably the best example of this is Kathleen Forni's critique of *A Knight's Tale*'s use of medieval chivalric prowess as a conduit for postmodern individualist aspirationalism, and of its use of chivalric tournaments as 'an early version of an Xtreme full-contact sport',¹⁵ which she argues presents a premodern analogue to contemporary capitalist-democratic fantasies in which stardom and riches are gained by achieving excellence within a system of sports meritocracy. Others, among them Nickolas Haydock and Caroline Jewers, have critiqued the film along similar lines, with Haydock arguing '[its] implicit exaltation of modern spectatorial athletics and celebrity as the site of democratic leveling panders to the contemporary obsession with sports stars as symbols of western society's pursuit of excellence and progress toward social justice'.¹⁶ One element that has attracted general disapprobation among critics is the film's unabashed Nike product placement — expressed particularly in the 'branding' of armour with the Nike swoosh and the catchphrase 'Joust Do It' which was used for the film's publicity — and its alignment of its themes with what Haydock calls an 'ur-Nike' ideology that values sports excellence as self-actualization.¹⁷ To these criticisms I would add that the film's Nike affiliation suggests a subscription to a corporate-style Social-Darwinist naturalization of competition and individual striving as forces of social progress. Candace Barrington makes a parallel argument to this in her perceptive analysis of how the film's celebration of William Thatcher's audacious impersonation of a nobleman 'speaks to and valorizes' contemporary America's capitalist-meritocratic celebration of highstakes venturing and successful risk-

15 Kathleen Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer: Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 37.3 (2003), 253–64 (p. 256).

16 Nickolas Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche in *First Knight* and *A Knight's Tale*', in *Film and Fiction: Reviewing the Middle Ages*, eds Tom Shippey and Martin Arnold (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 5–38 (p. 25). See also Caroline Jewers, 'Hard Day's Knights: *First Knight*, *A Knight's Tale*, and *Black Knight*', in *The Medieval Hero On Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, pp. 192–210.

17 Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama', p. 26.

taking individuals.¹⁸ Forni is, however, the most openly critical of the broader ideological implications of the film's celebrity- and commodity-fetishism, saying 'the capitalist master narrative which dictates that temporal happiness is ostensibly derived from socioeconomic status and privilege is left unquestioned'.¹⁹

As ideology critique, Forni's account lands some forceful blows. Her reading of the film's chivalric narrative, furthermore, is not only powerful but understandable. She wishes not only to demonstrate exactly how the medieval period and Chaucer's text have been deployed by Helgeland, but moreover to critique what she regards as the American colonization of the past that underpins the film, a colonization that she argues rests on the assumption that 'American socioeconomic aspirations are transhistorical'.²⁰ The approach she chooses to mount this critique is to contrast the film's medieval world and its chivalric discourse with Chaucer's text and the context of late medieval chivalric culture. But herein lies a central instability in Forni's strategy. Her statement that the film transforms Chaucer's 'Boethian exploration of human happiness and divine justice into a predictable vulgar myth of fulfillment'²¹ invokes the Chaucerian text as what Derrida in *Of Grammatology* calls the 'transcendental signified',²² and what I have been calling the medieval definite article – that is, as the fantasized hermeneutic terminus that exposes the relative authenticity or inauthenticity of medievalist appropriations, and against whose truth their ideological 'interestedness' is measured. This is also apparent in her argument that the beating and humiliation of the Geoffrey Chaucer character in the film is 'a metaphor for his modern, popular reception',²³ while his stripping naked is metaphorical of him 'hav[ing] been stripped of all historical fact',²⁴ an analogy that ultimately presents the film's wilfully anachronistic portrait of the poet Chaucer as an act of interpretative dishonour. Yet this strain of argument, and especially the last statement, seems distinctly at odds with her otherwise relatively approving analysis of the film's Geoffrey Chaucer character, which she regards as a postmodern continuation of the tradition of apocryphal Chaucer portraiture. Although she begins by stating that the chronology of Chaucer's life has been distorted in the film, she situates this distortion

18 Candace Barrington, *American Chaucers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 143–53.

19 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 257.

20 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 257.

21 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 254.

22 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 49.

23 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 262.

24 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 259.

within a long tradition that prompts us 'to consider both the history of the Chaucerian persona and how Chaucer is constructed in the popular imagination'.²⁵

This instability in Forni's approach to the film interests me because it discloses a paradigmatic instability with which virtually all medievalism scholars grapple. Whenever medievalism scholars attempt to discriminate as to when and on what terms anachronism is acceptable, this same instability arises. To their credit, these scholars are not satisfied by relativistic denials of the problem; but equally some of the resolutions offered fail to displace the paradigm that is the cause of the problem. One of the tropes that has cropped up repeatedly as an attempt to neutralize the threat posed by cinematic anachronism is the stipulation that historical films should reproduce 'the spirit of the era'. One of the now-classic formulations of this comes from Natalie Zemon Davis, who argued that 'historical authenticity comes first and foremost from the film's credible connection with the spirit of the period'.²⁶ Admittedly, Davis's comment is now over twenty years old, but the same trope reappears in recent work on medievalist film, such as John Aberth's *Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. For the most part, Aberth is careful about weighing cinema's use of medieval source materials as 'the foundation of our knowledge ... of that distant time'²⁷ against its need to interpret the past for contemporary entertainment, ideological, and aesthetic purposes. Despite this evenhandedness, Aberth ultimately asserts that

indignities committed against history may be forgiven ... if the overall vision of the film remains true to the spirit of the Middle Ages. In other words, does the film capture some of the essence of the medieval outlook? Does it convey what it was like to live in those times?²⁸

We find this again in William Paden's 1998 analysis of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, where despite arguing that Bergman's Middle Ages is a composite historical fantasy, he concludes 'in his freedom as an artist, Bergman has reinvented the Middle Ages through a dark glass, but he has reinvented with

25 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 254.

26 Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity', *The Yale Review*, 76 (1986–87), 476–82 (p. 477).

27 John Aberth, *Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. x.

28 Aberth, *Knight at the Movies*, p. xi.

startling fidelity'.²⁹ It is fascinating to detect the seemingly ineradicable trace of this desire for 'medieval spirit' lingering even in the unapologetically postmodern commentary of Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh. In their introduction to the 2007 essay collection *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, Ramey and Pugh enter a persuasive plea that 'medieval cinema as a genre evinces little interest in historical accuracy' and thus should be analysed for what it tells us about the present rather than what it supposedly fails to tell us about the past. The quest to find 'a chimerical vision of cinematic authenticity', they argue, is the scholarly equivalent of waiting for Samuel Beckett's indefinitely deferred Godot. And yet their candid confession to harbouring a 'disappointed desire for a film—any film—to "get it right"' simultaneously disavows and acknowledges the idea that there is an indefinable but unmistakable medieval 'it' that can be gotten 'right'.³⁰

One of the clearest and least reflexive promoters of this notion in relation to recent medievalist films, including *A Knight's Tale*, is Carl James Grindley, whose initial definition of medievalist films grants them historical license but insists that they should still attempt a 'plausible' vision of the medieval past.³¹ Grindley's main objection to *A Knight's Tale* is thus based on the film's many open breaches of plausibility: because of his interest in medieval armour, his particular *bête noir* is the film's girl-power blacksmith with her 'unrealistic' workspace and work practices, not to mention the Nike logo she etches onto armour. The subscription to historical fidelity lurking beneath Grindley's early eschewal of this concept comes into full view later into his argument when, expressing his discomfort with *A Knight's Tale*'s lack of 'fidelity to the material' it uses, he suggests that its disruptions of historical verisimilitude are a kind of self-sabotage emerging out of the film being 'afraid of its own ambition of realism'.³² By this formulation, *A Knight's Tale*'s anachronism is a cynical and thwarted withdrawal from the noble and, it seems, attainable goal of plausible (which in Grindley's formulation means quasi-realist) medievalist representation.

29 William D. Paden, 'Reconstructing the Middle Ages: The Monk's Sermon in *The Seventh Seal*', in *Medievalism and the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Lesley Workman*, eds Tom Shippey and Richard Utz (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), pp. 287–305 (p. 304).

30 Lynn T. Ramey and Tyson Pugh, 'Introduction: Filming the "Other" Middle Ages', in *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, eds Ramey and Pugh (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 1–12 (p. 2).

31 Charles James Grindley, 'Arms and the Man: The Curious Inaccuracy of Medieval Arms in Contemporary Film', *Film & History*, 36.1 (2006), 14–17 (p. 15).

32 Grindley, p. 15.

This widespread and admittedly appealing invocation of a medieval *zeitgeist* is intended by both Aberth and Grindley to have the positive effect of absolving medievalist film from the pedantic and indeed intimidating imperative to faithfully recreate specific times and places from the medieval past. There is, however, a major problem with this position. For all its apparent rejection of historical fidelity, it ultimately subscribes to the notion of the Middle Ages as a kind of ineffable yet universally recognized historical aggregate whose essence can, and should, somehow be distilled and reproduced even in blithely anachronistic cinematic renderings of the Middle Ages such as *A Knight's Tale*. This assertion of a medieval essence which, moreover, seems able to be retrieved uninflected by contemporary historical imagination, seems especially surprising when found nestled within the folds of otherwise careful arguments against historical fidelity. What Aberth and Grindley's arguments disclose is yet another quite idiosyncratic form of medievalism scholars' desire to identify and secure the originary presence of the medieval. This is made most explicit in Aberth's argument that film's 'freed[om] from the necessity of proof' allows it to enter creatively but authentically into lived medieval experience, finding out 'Did Joan of Arc want to die? ... What did it feel like in the onslaught of the Black Death? Was Richard the Lionhearted gay?'³³

This 'contamination' by the medieval doubles when we attempt to deal with a film such as *A Knight's Tale* that does not simply represent a past era but evokes, and is held to have at least partly adapted, a specific medieval literary text. For the most part, work on medievalist cinema has, to its detriment, failed to acknowledge its kinship to the field of cinema adaptation studies; however, when these two areas are brought together, the particular complexity of dealing with medievalist cinema is thrown into relief. We can learn much by reflecting on the impasses to which this sister field has brought itself, and how it has attempted to move beyond them. Of particular significance in this respect is how medievalism studies' disavowal of its reliance on a notion of the 'real' Middle Ages bears a striking parallel to a disavowal that continues to dog the field of adaptation studies. As Rochelle Hurst has persuasively argued, despite many recent attempts by adaptation scholars to unseat 'fidelity to the literary source text' as the prevailing criterion for evaluating a cinematic adaptation, and to argue against the subordination of the film within this paradigm, the field is yet to shed its axiomatic privileging of the literary 'original' over the cinematic 'copy'.³⁴

33 Aberth, *Knight at the Movies*, p. ix.

34 Rochelle Hurst, 'Adaptation as an Undecidable: Fidelity and Binarity from Bluestone to Derrida', in *IN/FIDELITY: Essays on Film Adaptation*, eds Nancy C. Mellerski and David

Arguably the clearest example cited by Hurst comes from Imelda Whelehan. In her co-edited *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (1999), Whelehan's rejection of the stranglehold of the fidelity paradigm would seem to free a film like *A Knight's Tale* from the duty to recreate accurately Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* (or indeed the vision of chivalry presented in Maurice Keen's 1984 study *Chivalry*, which Haydock astutely identifies as Helgeland's other main textual source). And yet this paradigm is substantially preserved in Whelehan's suggestion that the cinematic text might be better measured by its capacity to echo not the historical or narrative details of the literary text on which it is based, but rather the text's core values and 'ideological perspectives'.³⁵ This formulation substantially preserves Platonic assumptions about the originary value of the source text, suggesting that this text can, and moreover should, be preserved and reproduced cinematically even in the face of extensive adaptive liberties of a historical, narrative, and aesthetic nature. Judging by the virtually unanimous criticism of *A Knight's Tale*'s avowedly modern, capitalist, and meritocratic ideology, it comprehensively fails even Whelehan's apparently more liberal adaptation test. Whelehan's gesture, which Hurst rightly points out simply replaces fidelity *ad verbum* with 'fidelity to the spirit of the source text',³⁶ is worthy of mention here because as an attempt to redress the problems of the textual fidelity model, it reveals the extent to which contemporary thinking on cinematic adaptation resorts to the same covert ('spirit of the ...') Platonism as medievalism studies. This can be seen, as Haydock has also remarked, in much recent work on such cinematic adaptations of medievalist texts as Jerry Zucker's 1995 Arthurian film *First Knight*, which is roundly condemned by Kevin Harty and many others for its 'fail[ure] to capture the spirit of the original legend'.³⁷

Under this double scholarly paradigm, a medievalist film like *A Knight's Tale* is doubly vulnerable to scholarly devaluation, and has no other fate but to be treated as doubly simulacral. First, as we have seen, as a medievalist text it is held to have failed (however deliberately) to capture the historical past, whether

L. Kranz (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), pp. 172–96 (p. 182). My thanks to Rochelle for many clarifying discussions on this topic.

35 Imelda Whelehan, 'Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas', in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, eds Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3–19, (p. 17).

36 Hurst, 'Adaptation as an Undecidable', p. 193.

37 Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* (London: McFarland, 1999), p. 97.

in fact or in spirit. Second, as a cinematic adaptation it is devalued in relation to its literary source. This is borne out repeatedly in scholarship on the film, where we find the privileging of the literary text tellingly played out: for despite numerous scholars' avowals that the film is not an adaptation of *The Knight's Tale*, there is still a noteworthy tendency to compare it, generally unfavourably, to Chaucer's text. To take the most sustained instance, Forni, despite stating that 'there is little connection'³⁸ between Helgeland's and Chaucer's texts, goes on to anatomize the many ways, from the thematic to the aesthetic, in which the film transforms Chaucer's text. Moreover, as I briefly indicated earlier, for Forni transformation generally means debasement. Describing the film as a 'cavalier appropriation', she argues that it 'fails as a constructive form of literary symbiosis' because all of its adaptations from Chaucer's text are taken in the direction of capitalistic mythologizing, and hence vulgarization.³⁹ She cites the film as confirmation of Steve Ellis's remark in *Chaucer at Large* (2000) that representations of Chaucer have followed a downward trajectory from complex to 'reductive' appreciation of his work.⁴⁰

Here again the complexity of the undertaking of Forni and others becomes apparent, for her privileging of the medieval text neatly dovetails with, but also ultimately compromises, her critique of the film's ideology. Not only does her penetrating reading of the film's Nike ideology not rely for its force on a homologous comparison with Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, it is in fact hampered by the spectral Platonism underpinning the comparison. I want to suggest that this film quite expressly offers us a different way into conceptualizing the relationship between medieval and medievalist texts. I will demonstrate this by focusing on the film's most conspicuous statement on the question of its relationship to the originary text evoked by its title. This statement comes at the end of the film when, having actively participated in William Thatcher's self-invention as champion by forging patents of nobility for William, the roguish character Geoff Chaucer repositions himself as witness and recorder by announcing that he will 'write some of this story down'. This moment offers a playful and knowing inversion in which the preceding film narrative is presented as the source text for Chaucer's written text, thereby dramatizing in good aporetic fashion the very problem of textual origin. Although Forni describes the film as 'a very loose adaptation of the first Canterbury

38 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 253

39 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', pp. 253, 254.

40 Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 27. Referred to in Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 255.

tale',⁴¹ Geoff's announcement cheekily suggests that in fact it is Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, or indeed *The Canterbury Tales*, that is a 'very loose adaptation' of *A Knight's Tale*.

This final, unravelling moment is significant in both cinematic and medievalist terms. To use a Derridean term, it stages what can be described as an expression of the film's undecidability. Derrida's best-known (though typically dense) articulation of this term is found in *Positions*, where he describes 'undecidables' as

unities of simulacrum, 'false' verbal properties ... that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganising it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics.⁴²

The notion of the undecidable is central to Derrida's project of rigorously dismantling binary logic and its attendant hierarchies. As a term that cannot exclusively occupy either pole within a dichotomy, the undecidable draws out the mutual contamination inherent in dichotomous thought, which is, to use a familiar Derridean phrase, 'always already' unsettled. This notion of undecidability is significant for *A Knight's Tale* as it offers a way to understand it both as a film and as a medievalist text that does not reinforce its status as simulacrum. Undecidability has already been taken up by film adaptation scholars such as Robert Stam, Thomas Leitch, James Naremore, and Rochelle Hurst, who argues '[a]s an undecidable, the adaptation – situated somewhere between the categories of novel and film, simultaneously recognized as both and as neither – challenges the novel/film binary, thereby refuting the hierarchy that situates the novel as innately superior to the film, and thus rendering problematic the desire for fidelity'.⁴³ The scene from *A Knight's Tale* partakes of, and indeed stages, the undecidability of the cinematic adaptation, perfectly articulating Joy Gould Boyum's statement that that a cinematic text 'stands in indissoluble relation' to its literary source.⁴⁴ This scene also suggests that this logic needs to be extended to the film as medievalist text, for medievalist texts are also undecidables. Defying the paradigm in which texts are *either* medieval *or* medievalist, original *or* adaptation, their content is both medieval *and* medievalist; they are both originals *and* copies.

41 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 253.

42 Derrida, *Positions*, trans. and ed. Alan Bass (London: Athlone, 1981), p. 43.

43 Hurst, 'Adaptation as an Undecidable', p. 183.

44 Joy Gould Boyum, *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film* (New York: Universe Books, 1985), p.64.

The indefinite article in *A Knight's Tale* encompasses but also exceeds *The Knight's Tale* as medieval definite article: the film is both *The Knight's Tale* and, as I suggest in the opening to this article, another – or indeed any – knight's tale.

In conjunction with the title, the aporetic loop of the Chaucer-turns-author scene forces us to retrospectively reconsider the puzzle of what we have just watched. On the one hand the film does, as Forni suggests, attach itself to, and rely on, the originary authority of the medieval text via the unavoidable Chaucerian interpellation of its title. On the other hand, Helgeland's text renders Chaucer's text as non-originary and reliant on the film's narrative for its very existence.⁴⁵ While we can acknowledge that the story of textual origin offered at the end of the film is literally impossible, its paradigm of mutual dependence is exemplary: the medieval text brings the medievalist text into being, and the medievalist text resuscitates, and sustains the life of, the medieval text. Helgeland's text also, in a further irony, precedes Chaucer's for many modern viewers, who, if they experience Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* at all, will view it through the prism of the 'originary' Hollywood film. Robert Stam, noting that scholars in adaptation studies have said little about the 'reverse sequence' in which the spectator sees the film adaptation before the novel, speculates that in such a situation 'the film [might] become the experiential "original" betrayed by the actual original'; equally, however, 'the incomparable riches of the verbal text' might supersede the filmic 'original'. Or, indeed, we might encounter yet another of what Stam calls 'the aporias of "fidelity"', in which neither text is nominated as the primordial, or indeed the final, version of the text.⁴⁶ And so too within the undecidable that is medievalism, it is vital for us to grasp that both medieval and medievalist text contribute to, but neither determines, or terminates, the range of meanings that can accrue to the medieval text.

The paradoxical temporality underpinning the film's positing of both texts as origins and non-origins, along with its flagrant presentation of historical

45 Holly A. Crocker makes the point that it was Helgeland's own dilemmas and ambitions of authorship that brought into being his Geoff Chaucer character, to 'manifest [Helgeland's] idea of authorship'. See Crocker's essay 'Chaucer's Man Show: Anachronistic Authority in Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*', in *Race, Class and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, pp. 183–98 (p. 185). In this respect Chaucer also relies on Helgeland-the-author for his very existence.

46 Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation', in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, eds Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 1–52 (p. 14).

impossibilities, arguably trouble arguments that condemn it for its colonization of the ideological landscape of the past, which it retrofits in the image of contemporary America. It is true that in its central narrative of the metamorphosis of self-starting peasant squire William Thatcher into chivalric champion and 'true' knight, the film broaches and 'solves' the problem of social origins by offering a meritocratic fantasy in which an individual's determination and ability, combined with strategic dishonesty under the star of chutzpah, enable a spectacular vaulting of class distinction. But it is less clear, despite Helgeland's comment that medieval people 'were probably a whole lot like we are today',⁴⁷ that we can take at face value the idea that this Americanized past is proffered as the director's genuine historical vision, or that he is truly saying 'it was ever thus'.

The use of 1970s stadium anthems such as Queen's 'We Will Rock You' in the film's tournament scenes is a good case in point. If Helgeland had included this music extra-diagetically, that is laid over these scenes, he would have been able to draw the trans-historical parallel between chivalric tournaments and contemporary spectator sport without rupturing the verisimilitude of the medieval *mise-en-scène*. Instead, the music is actually *in* the scenes; the medieval crowds chant these 1970s anthems as they spur on the chivalric contestants, thus generating what Barrington has called 'an audio neverland' that is neither medieval nor twentieth century.⁴⁸ The trans-historical vision thus becomes an impossibility just when it is most appealingly and amusingly evoked. Similarly, when the character Geoff Chaucer decides to write a text based on the film's events, the film posits itself as a possible but also an impossible origin for Chaucer's text. So just when it seems to be most clearly suggesting that an Americanesque world of capitalist aspirationalism was the ideological backdrop and inspiration for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, it simultaneously withdraws the suggestion because it presents us with the temporal impossibility of this ever having been Chaucer's world. Andrew James Johnston has perceptively argued, the film's 'ironic modernization' of the medieval past can only be experienced as humorous if audiences ultimately recognize the impossibility of what they are viewing; so the film, he argues invokes the alterity of the Middle Ages just as it appears to be asserting the continuity of this period with capitalist America.⁴⁹

47 Interview with Helgeland quoted in Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 257.

48 Barrington, *American Chaucers*, p. 146.

49 Andrew James Johnston, 'Filming the Seven Deadly Sins—Chaucer, Hollywood, and the Postmodern Middle Ages', in *Riddles, Knights and Cross-Dressing Saints: Essays on Medieval Language and Literature*, ed. Thomas Honneger (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 1–32 (pp. 28–29).

There is no doubt that the film flirts with a Nike vision of medieval chivalric culture; but the fact that it ultimately refuses to commit to this vision makes it, in my view, a less straightforward example of ideological colonization of the past than others have argued.

This raises the question: can a deconstructive approach adequately address the ideological elements in a medievalist text? In what is arguably the best-known critique of deconstruction from within medieval studies, David Aers, quoting Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, argues that the refusal of determinate meaning within this approach evinces an apoliticism that brings it into the collusion with the plain-faced distortions of truth that underpin the cynical *Realpolitik* of late-capitalist governments. Aers further argues that '[i]n rejecting the binaries true/false, good/bad, deconstructionists necessarily renounce any search for the true and the good, for the *archai* we need to grasp if we are to know and practice the virtues, including the virtue ... of Justice'.⁵⁰ Although my application of the paradigm of undecidability to *A Knight's Tale* has cast doubt on the reach of the particular claims made by the film's main ideological critics, this paradigm should not be understood to be evacuating from medievalism studies the requirement to engage with ideology. Acknowledgement of the undecidable nature of medievalism does not mean that the various ideological claims of medievalist texts should be submerged into a relativistic continuum of hermeneutic freeplay. Studies such as Simon Critchley's landmark *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992) have emphasized that while on the one hand for Derrida undecidability is the condition of impossibility that can lead to a potentially infinite deferral of meaning and judgment, it is also, crucially, the condition out of which decisions and judgment necessarily emerge, and out of which it is necessary that they emerge.⁵¹ As Derrida says in *Limited Inc*, 'whenever a decision is really a decision ... it is because it has passed through the ordeal of undecidability; it depends upon undecidability, which gives us something to decide'.⁵² In other words, interpretative, moral, and political decisions are only such if one has acknowledged the impossibility of complete or exhaustive knowledge upon which we might base a decision, and yet commits to a decision on the singular case at hand.

50 David Aers, 'Medievalists and Deconstruction: An Exemplum', in *From Medieval to Medievalism*, ed. John Simons (London: MacMillan, 1992), pp. 24–40 (p. 32).

51 See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 61, 67.

52 Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 148.

So how might ideological judgments about texts be made within the undecidable, infinitely proliferative field of medievalism? How do we assess the particular ideological force and implication of individual texts' representations of the Middle Ages or takes on medieval texts? As I have already discussed, some scholars have problematically resorted to the originary truth of the medieval text as a strategy to arrest and contain the disseminative movement of that text's meaning across its medievalist iterations. Forni's reading of *A Knight's Tale* against Chaucer's text, for instance, operates despite her acknowledgment that the film 'is the most recent in a long history of continuations, modernizations, and adaptations of the *Knight's Tale* dating back to the fifteenth century'.⁵³ She mentions Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and Dryden's *Palamon and Arcite* in passing, but refrains from considering Helgeland's narrative alongside any of these. By contrast, others such as Nickolas Haydock advocate the importance of assessing the intellectual and ideological characteristics of a medievalist text in relation not just to its medieval touchstone, but also to 'generations of pastiche stretching back not to an original but to earlier acts of compositive forgery'.⁵⁴ As a result, Haydock's analysis of the film's central narrative moves beyond an enumeration of its departures from Chaucer's text, to examine its place within the long history of Chaucer reception (without invoking a narrative of populist decline) and to evaluate its relationship to comparable recent films such as *Shakespeare in Love*.⁵⁵ In a complementary fashion, Ramey and Pugh insist that the final objective of analyzing medievalist films should not be uncovering their perpetration of historical 'falsehoods', but rather understanding how their deployment of the medieval past discloses 'truths about our present'.⁵⁶ In the case of *A Knight's Tale*, it may be that the contemporary 'truth' it reveals via its hermeneutic circularity is that the quest to locate ideological stability in the film is futile and reflects our desire to place a limit on textual complexity. Nevertheless, a deconstructive registering of the film's ideological undecidability (capitalist individualism is a reflection of atemporal human nature/capitalism is thoroughly modern and hence unnatural) should not be taken as placing Helgeland's film beyond the reach of ideology critique. On the contrary, I would argue that this undecidability is itself ideologically revealing, for it can be understood as a symptom of the film's conformity to the populist aspirations of the Hollywood blockbuster, albeit in an uncustomarily clever way.

53 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 254.

54 Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama', p. 33.

55 Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama', pp. 28–29.

56 Ramey and Pugh, 'Introduction: Filming the "Other" Middle Ages', p. 8.

By simultaneously catering to the capitalist individualism of its American mass audience and offering hermeneutic intrigue to attract the sceptical scholarly viewer, it increases its market share, as a cinema film and later as a domestically consumed DVD. Through a recognition of the film's undecidability, then, we are able to make a determination about its underlying ideological commitments.

If we are to truly grasp the significance of a medievalist text within the undecidability of medievalism, we need to accept, and not condemn, its partial truth, its blithe purloining, and most of all its fluctuating allegiances, which it directs promiscuously not only to the medieval past, but also to other (more recent and more distant) pasts, the present, and even the future. Unlike Greta Austin's suggestion that the main virtue of 'unfaithful' cinematic medievalism is its capacity to generate a historical curiosity that leads audiences back to the Middle Ages,⁵⁷ it is their oscillation between the Middle Ages and elsewhere that makes films like *A Knight's Tale* distinct, and which we need to probe further. It is true that taking this approach means that no single text, medieval or medievalist, can be deemed to hold the ultimate truth within the disseminative process of the Middle Ages' path through their medievalist afterlife. To adapt Stam's non-hierarchical formulation, both texts 'take their place alongside one another as relative co-equal neighbours or *collaborators* rather than as father and son or master and slave'.⁵⁸ It is also true that once a text is opened up in this way, a lot of work is required to draw out its many multi-temporal relationships to other texts and other periods, and to consider the meanings that emerge from these complex intersections. But the work is worth it, for we are better able to calibrate both the historical and the contemporary significance of individual medievalist texts when we can steer them down some of the intricate tributaries that flow into the longer and wider river that is medievalism, with all of its intense responsiveness to the changing demands of its historical and cultural contexts.

*English Literatures Programme
University of Wollongong*

57 Greta Austin, 'Were the Peasants Really So Clean? The Middle Ages in Film', *Film History*, 14 (2002), 136–41.

58 Stam, 'Introduction', *Literature and Film*, p. 12, italics mine.